DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 002 PS 029 513

AUTHOR Hertzog, Nancy B.
TITLE Reflections and Impressions from Reggio Emilia: "It's Not about Art!"
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 10p.; In: Early Childhood Research & Practice: An Internet Journal on the Development, Care, and Education of Young Children, 2001; see PS 029 507.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Activities; Classroom Communication; Classroom Environment; Gifted; *Preschool Education; *Program Descriptions; *Reggio Emilia Approach; Special Education; Student Centered Curriculum; Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Italy (Reggio Emilia); Program Characteristics

ABSTRACT

This article discusses an early childhood program administrator's reflections on her visit to the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The following six themes are discussed: (1) teachers' respect for each child; (2) teachers' emphasis on relationships; (3) the importance of art as the medium chosen to represent children's thinking; (4) the critical role of communication; (5) the relaxed pace in the schools; and (6) the teachers' different roles. The article concludes with ideas and questions inspired by the visit that the administrator would like to share with colleagues in a gifted education environment. (Author)

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ECRP Early Childhood Research & Practice

Spring 2001
Volume 3
Number 1

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Reflections and Impressions from Reggio Emilia: "It's Not about Art!"

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Abstract

This article discusses an early childhood program administrator's reflections on her visit to the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The following six themes are discussed: (1) teachers' respect for each child; (2) teachers' emphasis on relationships; (3) the importance of art as the medium chosen to represent children's thinking; (4) the critical role of communication; (5) the relaxed pace in the schools; and (6) the teachers' different roles. The article concludes with ideas and questions inspired by the visit that the administrator would like to share with colleagues in a gifted education environment.

Introduction

I recently returned from a 12-day study tour of the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. With 250 other American educators, I listened to the educators of Reggio Emilia talk about their system of educating youngsters in their municipal preschools and infant/toddler centers. I visited a total of 7 facilities out of 34 infant and toddler and pre-primary centers, with children being present during only two of those visits. Teachers, parents, *atelieristas* [artists], *pedagogistas* [curriculum specialists], and even the mayor of the city spoke to us about the schools and the teaching that goes on in them.

I noted all aspects of the school environments—the documentation displayed on the walls, the furniture, the way various things were placed around the rooms, the materials available to children and adults, the bathrooms, the kitchens, and the play areas. I wrote down all that was translated for us about everything from the huge documentation murals to the teacher's planning sheets posted in the classrooms. I was awestruck by the way that the pieces fit together to make Reggio Emilia early childhood programs exemplary. To help me make sense of all the pieces, I have divided what I learned into broad themes.

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Theme 1: Respect for Each Child

Respect for the child was an overarching theme throughout all the discourse and presentations of the study tour. It was expressed in the following ways: "The child is worthy of being listened to." "Listen, observe, interact, and learn from the child." "Do not place the child in adult-designed or arbitrary time slots of adult management systems." "If the child is misbehaving, find out why, find out what the child is trying to communicate, find out how you can help the child." "Your job as an adult is to help the child communicate his feelings and guide the child toward a positive resolution of the problem." If this philosophy and belief system were the norm in the United States, there would be no place in early childhood programs for assertive discipline plans, time scheduled in half-hour blocks, lines of children waiting to go to the restroom, lesson plans filled with activities for large groups of children, teacher-made patterns for children to trace, or children talking back to teachers. Instead, there would be more opportunities for teachers to talk individually with each child, more time for teachers to consult with other teachers or parents about the child's interests or behaviors, more opportunities for children to display their strengths and unique learning styles, and more visible displays of children's work in classrooms.

Over and over again, I was impressed with the notion that the teacher is one of the learners. The teacher is trying to learn about each child, not just what is typical of 3- or 4-year-olds. Two examples illustrate this theme:

The first example was revealed during a presentation about the differences between boys' and girls' perspectives on developing a plan for a city. Giovanni Piazza, an atelierista, explained how two boys worked together for approximately 30 minutes before a third boy joined in. Sitting with his hands on his cheeks, the third boy observed the other two as they worked together. Only after one of the boys drew a road toward this third child did the third child initiate working with the other two. I could imagine that in an American classroom a teacher might have intervened much earlier to coerce participation and collaboration. Many American teachers might have had difficulty respecting the time needed for the third boy to join in. Most American teachers have agendas and preconceived notions of what ought to be for each child.

Another example of this philosophy and attitude of respect toward the child became evident in a presentation about children with special rights (their term for children with disabilities). The presenter demonstrated how the team of teachers worked together to address the needs of a child with autism. For a year, they observed the child closely and documented what she enjoyed doing while she was at the center. They noticed that she had a keen interest in light, so they arranged the environment to give children opportunities to experiment with light sources. Children used flashlights to play with shadows on the wall. They drew pictures on overhead projectors to enlarge them on the wall. Then the teachers designed a device for the child, who had begun to draw on the acetate on the overhead projector, that allowed her to draw on acetate positioned like an easel with another child just on the other side.

The two children were physically close. The child chosen to paint alongside the child with autism was not too far ahead of her verbally and had not shown any difficulty in working with her. By designing the environment and the activities that could take place within the environment, teachers engaged the child with autism in the everyday activities in the classroom, including drawing, social interaction, and celebration of accomplishments. The teachers were patient. They reported that it took nearly two years for the child with autism to

become socially integrated into her peer group.

Theme 2: Teachers Emphasized Relationships—Understanding Relationships Involves the Highest Levels of Thinking

In a small art studio off to the side of one classroom, I noticed a book opened to a picture of the Milky Way galaxy. I thought that the children were studying about space. Other objects in the room included a bicycle wheel and an orange. On a large documentation board in another area of this classroom was a photograph of the bicycle wheel and the orange. I asked one of the teachers about the project that the documentation board described. She responded that the children were examining carefully the relationship between things that are found in nature and things that are man-made. In particular, the teachers asked the children, "What structure connects all other structures?" The children were observing the similarities in the physical structure of the objects, such as the sections of the orange and the spokes of the bicycle wheel.

These children were certainly exhibiting high-level thinking. Seeking relationships, comparing and contrasting, and pursuing similarities and differences are all strategies that engage the mind in high-level thought processes. The children were not, as I first suspected, studying factual information about space, the galaxy, or spiral objects.

The same was true with the study of the city of Reggio Emilia. When Giovanni Piazza described the boys' city as one that was functional and the girls' as one that involved social relationships, I wondered why the teacher did not intervene and draw their attention to "real aspects of cities" (i.e., they all must have electricity, water systems, sewer systems, etc.). The study was not about facts of cities. It was about the relationship of cities to the people who lived in them. In the context of their study of the town of Reggio Emilia, the children learned many facts about their own city, including many historical events that shaped the history and the development of their city. They made representations of the relationship of the city to their own lives. The study of the city was undertaken by all of the schools in the municipality, not to tell the same story about their city, but to come to understandings about how their city related to the children's own lives.

Theme 3: Art Is the Chosen Medium to Represent Children's Thinking

Much of what we see in exhibits of work coming from Reggio Emilia depicts the children's drawings, murals, 3-dimensional structures, and other forms of artistic products. It is easy to come away thinking that if we only had this type of art expertise in our classrooms, our children's products would be of equal quality. However, I have come to the realization that *it's not about art!* I saw how the teachers focused their attention on what the children were thinking and learning. I saw the teachers' complex system of planning and documenting what the children were thinking about various topics. I saw what I termed the "art medium" used to advance thinking and present challenges.

The teachers referred to their use of "graphic languages" to make the learning experience "visible." Carla Rinaldi talked about the "Pedagogy of Listening" using documentation as a visible form of listening. Without the careful attention to how ideas are represented, and the use of the art expertise, the children's work would be less visible to themselves and to the wider public. The graphic arts, broadly defined as any form of visual artistic representation,

are their chosen media to share with others what children are thinking, doing, feeling, learning, and experiencing. They teach children art techniques to give them tools to express their ideas.

Being artistic and creative is highly valued in this school culture. Large space is allocated to art studios, called *ateliers,* for the school. Each classroom has a small art studio, *mini-atelier,* connected to it where art materials are plentiful and accessible to the children. Aesthetically pleasing environments are designed purposefully. The *ateliers* in each school are filled with recyclable materials (e.g., glass beads, pipes, sockets, ceramic pieces) and natural elements (e.g., rocks, stones, beans, barley, seeds, seed pods, dried flowers). All of the materials are laid out aesthetically on open shelves and in clear containers, creating hues of colors to behold. In the bathrooms, there are glass containers of colored water. Calder-like mobiles hang from the ceilings with materials that reflect light such as clear beads, tin foil, and coins. Dividers are made out of transparent materials including acetate murals, strings of beads, and low, see-through shelves. Furniture provides space to work at all levels, including tables and chairs that are at adult heights. Children have high stools to sit at the high tables and small chairs to sit at the low ones. The difference in levels is aesthetically pleasing.

The children's work in progress is left out, reflecting active and ongoing engagement. Teachers carefully lay out materials for the next day's choices of activities. Materials are chosen thoughtfully. In one room, I noticed the teacher in her *mini-atelier* working with a small group of 4-year-olds. The children were painting representations of flowers. The teacher had premixed four shades of pink for the children to use. No matter what the children did with the paint, the colors were beautiful! I saw the teacher put her hand on a student's hand to help him wipe off the paintbrush so paint would not drip. I saw a teacher go to another part of the room to get a child who was engaged in another activity to come into the *mini-atelier* to work on a clay representation of a tree. It was something that *she* wanted him to do.

In another school, I saw large murals of colored designs in different hues of color. One contained oranges and yellows. Another was a mural with pinks and purples; another contained blues and greens. The *atelierista* told me that she mixed these colors for children to "experiment with the pleasures of working within hues of colors." There were signs on the wall about how to mix colors. One board that was displayed in the *atelier* explained in great detail all of the ways one could mold clay to create spirals, circles, rectangles, triangles, the sun, and crosses.

Many of the students' investigations were about natural phenomena. I saw an ongoing study of trees. While making clay representations of trees, the classroom teacher helped children learn the technique of using water and clay mixed to form a glue that held other clay pieces together. The other teacher in the same room showed children how to use a real leaf to make an imprint of the veins onto a clay piece. Children had many opportunities to learn, practice, and apply techniques related to visual arts.

Their artistic representations were highly valued and were the basic medium for the public to view their work. I bought a book from one school that contained children's drawings of trees and quotations about their drawings. Each school sells a book about the school, called the "Identity Card," which includes floor plans, numbers of children, staff hours, recent and past projects, and other information. Many schools sell other artifacts, sharing the children's work with the world. Artifacts include bookmarks, T-shirts, sweatshirts, books telling the story of their projects, and posters of children's drawings.

I saw beautiful mosaics at one school where the *atelierista* specialized in both science and art and had a particular passion for working with natural materials. The mosaics were done on glass-covered tables—not glued but carefully placed in a background of small seeds. The texture was like sand. Each mosaic could be done again and wiped away with a block to smooth the palette. Children were carefully building structures with stones, marble scraps, blocks, and other materials while I was there. I observed children explaining their building structures to all of the other children under the teacher's direction. I was most impressed with the *atelierista's* guidance of an activity with an insect. He put a dead insect under a large magnifying glass and projected the enlarged image onto a video screen. He provided black markers and white paper for the children to make an observational drawing from the large screen image.

If the people from Reggio Emilia used another art form such as music, would their work be as visible to the world? Would songs flow forth and children's compositions be sold to visitors? If the people from Reggio Emilia hired a dancer and built a dance studio in each school, would their thinking be visible through movement? Would dance concerts be routine events at the end of the day? Would videos of dances be the visible medium for teachers' reflections? Although I cannot speculate upon the answers to those questions about schools in Italy, there are examples of other schools (i.e., schools for the performing arts) in the United States and abroad that do focus on other art forms and that do strive to make their students' thinking visible through other "languages." It is interesting to note that most of the schools that specialize in the arts in this country are secondary schools, and their primary goal is to cultivate the talents of students in those specific art forms.

Graphic languages, the *atelierista,* and the *atelier* are all critical to the goals of the philosophy and belief systems in Reggio Emilia. Art is the medium by which the educators in Reggio Emilia are encouraging the children to communicate. It is the medium by which their teachers "listen" to the children.

Theme 4: Communication Is Critical

The documentation boards in every room are examples of the value that the educators in Reggio Emilia place on children's work and on communicating with others about the children's experiences. Each documentation board has photographs of children working, samples of children's products, and text describing some aspect of what the children are doing. Most of these documentation boards are completed by the *atelierista* and demonstrate graphic design expertise. The teachers from the infant and toddler schools told us that they do their own boards and are much slower in getting them up for parents to see. Documentation boards have a white background and are consistent across schools in style and function.

In addition to having documentation boards in the room, teachers also keep a daily journal in which they communicate to parents how their children spend time during the day. The journal includes a diagram depicting areas of the classroom where children spent most of their time, students' drawings, and some text reflecting what children said they were thinking about specific topics on a given day.

As discussed earlier, the focus on the graphic languages is a means to help children communicate about and wrestle with their ideas. The environment in the classrooms is

conducive to dialogue and exchanges of ideas. Because children are working in small groups, teachers have time to record what children are saying and to reflect on these conversations at a later date. Teachers have time to talk with small groups of children.

Theme 5: Children and Adults Are Not Hurried

At no time did anyone appear to be in a hurry during my trip to Italy. It may be a part of U.S. culture to be constantly hurried. Most American teachers feel the pressure to cover required content. Time is fragmented in most American schools. Teachers rush from one activity to another, especially within the structure of American elementary schools, where children's activities are dictated by schoolwide master schedules that fit classes of children into music, P.E., lunch, art, and so forth.

Schools in Reggio Emilia are small enough for all of the children to eat together. All of the children may go out to play at the same time (and without teacher monitors!) because the outside play area is within view of the teachers in the classroom. Children that I observed flowed from one activity to the next. I did not see a schedule posted on the wall. I was told that they have a group meeting in the morning, a work period, a play period, a lunch time and playtime, a nap time, and another work time or playtime. What does not get completed in one work time may be completed in the next work period. Children are not urged to hurry to complete a project because teachers are not trying to initiate a different activity.

From my perspective, there seems to be a relaxed approach to the way time is used in the Italian culture. Getting engaged in something at a deep level takes time—weeks, months, even years. Initially, when topics are brainstormed, the staff thinks about them in terms of the academic year. What topic might they like to spend the year pursuing? This approach does not mean that every topic is preplanned for the year. However, by thinking about topics with long-range possibilities, teachers are not rushing students from one topic to another. Their flexible use of time allows students to spend whole mornings with the *atelierista*. The *atelierista* does not have to fit all of the children from one classroom into his or her schedule—unlike our typical art teacher's schedule where each student has to have so many minutes in a special class. The *atelierista* is not used as a break for the regular classroom teacher. *Atelieristas* are valued members of the community of teachers. They decide with the teachers who needs their help with a particular aspect of a project, and they usually work intensely with no more than half a dozen children for about an hour and a half per day.

Theme 6: The Teacher Has Different Roles

The teacher in Reggio Emilia is the researcher, the data gatherer, the learner, and the strategic contributor to the child's capacity to learn. The responsibility is on the community of teachers to provide the contexts for learning. I observed one teacher taking notes and watching a small group of children playing in the dramatic play area. I was intrigued with a planning matrix that I saw on one of the walls in a *mini-atelier*. The matrix articulated the contexts in which the teachers would observe and listen to the children. It described how the teachers would document what they were looking for within a given context. It also detailed skills, attitudes, and dispositions that they were looking for, including a child's sentence structure, choice of friends, attention span, how the child holds his paintbrush, his ability to wait for his turn, if he remembers who is absent, and so forth.

The curriculum emerges with purpose, direction, and detail. Teachers constantly gather information about what is emerging. One statement on the planning form was translated to me: "In relationship between story and everyday experiences of children, the theme of feelings has emerged. Feelings are about friendships, love and affection, happiness, anger, hate, conflict, sadness, and fear." Most definitely, the role of the teacher was not just to impart facts and knowledge. The role of the teacher was to help children come to understand the relationships of things around them to themselves. Teachers wanted children to learn "big ideas" such as community, respect, and competence.

What Does It All Mean to Me?

As an administrator of an early childhood program, I take from Reggio Emilia some ideas that I want to implement, some that I want to convey to those with whom I work, and some that I want to think more about. Naturally, the things that can be implemented are those on the surface of their approach. I agree with what one speaker told us, using words from *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupery, "What's essential is invisible to the eye." In Fullan's words, "You can't mandate what matters" (Fullan, 1993, p. 21).

There are a number of things I can try to implement and share with colleagues and co-workers:

- I can strive for more aesthetically pleasing environments in our classrooms. I can ask teachers to examine their classrooms for clutter. I can bring someone into the rooms with more experience in the field of aesthetics to help us create classrooms that are functional and beautiful at the same time.

- I can look for more recyclable materials and have teachers create spaces that resemble an *atelier*. I can emphasize the importance of having these man-made and natural materials available for the children.

- I can work with teachers on ways to inform parents and the community about the learning and the experiences that children have at school; for example, getting help with documentation boards, having more parental input into our topics of investigation, and distributing an informative pamphlet about our school with recent and current projects described.

- I can make better use of technology and strive to make that technology available to teachers, students, and helpers. I am definitely interested in exploring ways we can use scanners, videos, and software to further develop and extend the ideas of the students.

- I can share the concept of the entire school community with the teachers at my school so that they let go of the concept of "the classroom" as its own entity. By establishing the school as one community, human and other resources across classrooms can be shared. Responsibility can also be shared.

From the Gifted Education Perspective

I believe there is a strong relationship between teachers' values and beliefs and how teachers define their role. I have been immersed in the field of gifted education for more than 20 years and have articulated some of those beliefs about children that teachers of children of high ability generally possess:

- They assume their students are capable.
- They believe their role is to help their students fulfill their potential.
- They believe they should engage their students in higher levels of thinking.
- They believe they should allow opportunities for students to pursue their interests, talents, or passions.
- They view themselves as facilitators of learning.
- They respect the talents of their students.
- They believe their students are unique and have different learning style preferences.
- They believe that learning should be challenging and intrinsically rewarding.

Based on these beliefs, educators trained in gifted education tend to provide opportunities in their classrooms for students to work at varied paces, on different projects, and in authentic and meaningful ways. Gifted programs tend to include project investigations and opportunities for children to engage in in-depth studies. Therefore, I found the values that were conveyed in Reggio Emilia complementary to those that educators of gifted students would likely hold, with perhaps one exception. In gifted education, we tend to focus on individual needs, interests, and abilities. In Reggio Emilia, teachers highlighted group work, group products, and group studies. Documentation boards, however, contained pictures of individual children engaged in thinking through a problem. I need more information to draw conclusions about the delicate balance between individual and group effort in the Reggio Emilia environments.

I would like to know what values and beliefs teachers must hold to implement the philosophy of the teachers in Reggio Emilia. Which values and beliefs are most compatible with the researcher role that teachers play in Reggio Emilia? If teachers valued children's thinking about big ideas and relationships, would they see the fallacy of teaching all children the same thing at the same time—expecting all children to learn the same thing? If teachers held as their goal for children that they become better members of a community, would they engage in practices that enhance competition?

Two burning and related questions I take away from Reggio Emilia are: (1) How can we, as teacher educators, change teachers' practices from creating passive learning environments to engaging children in active, meaningful activities? and (2) How can we, as teacher educators, change the role of the teacher in the United States to become a facilitator and enhancer of learning? How do we help people change their belief systems, which ultimately affect their practices? What are the relationships between practices, values, and beliefs?

What are the conditions that need to exist for teachers to deepen their understandings of the effects of our conventional practices? What can I do as a teacher educator to "provide the context" for this type of change in teaching philosophy and style? How can we create communities of teachers, as they do in Reggio Emilia, who value their students' ideas and value the way children come to learn about the world around them?

I want to go back to Reggio Emilia. I have only scratched the surface of what I learned and observed there. I want to learn more about how their projects are initiated, how different

children decide to do different things, how teachers have time to listen so intently to what children are saying, how teachers and staff members work so cooperatively in their school community, how children enter into a project with the *atelierista,* what concepts they want children to gain from being engaged in a study, and how they evaluate their work.

When I visited the Documentation Center, an office that collects documentation from the schools, the speaker whet my appetite for dialogue about evaluation. She explained several things that they examine at the Documentation Center:

- What topics are more frequently used for children?
- How do we cover 100 languages?
- Are some schools keener on some topics than others?
- Have we increased our ability to communicate?
- Is the documentation just a record or is there an interpretation?
- Is the documentation just description or does it go to another cognitive level?
- How does the documentation reflect each school?

I am intrigued by these questions and want to continue my study of Reggio Emilia.

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